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### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Kersten, C. (2014). Aaron Hughes, *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction*: Durham: Acumen, 2014. *Journal of Global and International Studies*, 6(1), 169-171.

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**Aaron Hughes. *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction*.  
Durham: Acumen, 2014**

*Theorizing Islam* is a companion of sorts to Aaron Hughes' earlier book, *Situating Islam*, in which he examines the relationship between the study of Islam and Near or Middle Eastern studies, set against the background of Edward Said's seminal critique of these fields in *Orientalism*. In this new work, Hughes shifts his attention to the relation between Islamic studies and religious studies as fields of scholarly enquiry or, more specifically, to certain writings by "scholars of Islam working in departments of religious studies" (p. 3). By way of self-disclosure, I should point out that as a scholar of Islam working not simply in a department of religious studies but in a department of *theology* and religious studies, I do not like either the designation "Islamic studies" or "religious studies"; the reasons being that the former implies the notion that I do a kind of "Islamic theology", while the latter appears more to identify a kind of disposition toward the work than describe the subject matter itself. Therefore, I prefer speaking of the "study of Islam" and the "study of religion."

In examining the way Islam is studied in the setting of generic departments for the study of religion, Hughes takes his cues from Bruce Lincoln, Russell McCutcheon, and Jonathan Z. Smith, scholars of religion who are not so much engaged in researching particular religious traditions or phenomena earmarked as "religious" as they are in examining the ways in which their peers do their work and present their findings. The resulting critiques and alternative approaches advocate a more consciously self-reflective attitude toward the theory and method of the study of religion.

The writings of Lincoln, McCutcheon, and Smith offer much food for thought in contemplating the awkwardness that characterized and – to an extent – still characterizes the relationship between scholars of Islam and of religion, respectively. Historically, the scholars of religion seemed somewhat in awe of the philological erudition of the Islamicists, while the latter tend to display a degree of disdain towards religious studies, which they perceive as being primarily interested in archaic and tribal religious traditions.

While the study of Islam can benefit from drawing on the theoretical work done by Lincoln, Smith and McCutcheon, *Theorizing Islam* falls short of expectations in that it does not sufficiently critique or deconstruct the current state of affairs in Islamic Studies as a subfield of religious studies (despite the words "disciplinary deconstruction" appearing in the book's subtitle), nor does it offer much in terms of an alternative approach or research agenda (despite the appearance of "reconstruction"). From the confrontational tone employed in the book, it also becomes clear that the work is very much driven by a particular polemic between certain scholars working in American Academe. Perhaps this also accounts for the fact that Hughes restricts his critique to a very limited topical focus and infelicitous choice of examples, while his suggestions for alternative approaches are equally narrow as well as rather summary. Much of what is presented in this book has also appeared in print elsewhere.

*Theorizing Islam* focuses on the representation of the figure of Muhammad and the status of women in Muslim societies. It is somewhat puzzling why Hughes has chosen to impose such a restriction since the whole edifice we conventionally and conveniently refer to as "Islam" also encompasses a rich tradition in theological, legal, philosophical, and spiritual or mystical thinking, as well as a whole array of often culturally specific practices. Only toward the end of the work does it become clear that Hughes considers research into these subject areas the province and domain of scholars working in Near Eastern studies who have specialized in Islam, not of academics from the study of religion.

Hughes directs his criticism of Islamic studies toward three individuals in particular: Carl Ernst, John Esposito, and Omid Safi, showcasing them as prime examples of individuals who engage in what he calls the "crypto" or "quasi" theology and "apologetics," informed by

liberal Protestantism. Hughes argues that this is the “regnant discourse” coming out of the Study of Islam section of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Associated with prestigious universities such as the University of North Carolina, Georgetown, and Duke, the three individuals singled out by Hughes are certainly very influential and high profile AAR members, but I question whether they can be made representative of the full range of scholarship in the study of Islam as a subfield of the study of religion. Moreover, as a non-US-based academic, this reviewer would also like to observe that while the AAR may be the largest professional organization of scholars of religion in North America, America is not the world; therefore, the Islam Section of the AAR does not represent global scholarship in that field. To this outside observer, *Theorizing Islam* comes across as a very parochial polemic from within a certain section of the global community of scholars who conduct research into Islam and the Muslim world.

This is not to deny that the targeted AAR triumvirate have a particular way of engaging with Islam as a religious tradition that is open to challenge. However, rather than assuming a disqualifying either/or attitude, the alternative and/or position would allow for a more comprehensive but still critical examination of different ways of engaging in the study of religion, an option left open by the taxonomy proposed by Russell McCutcheon, in which he distinguishes “theologians” from “liberal phenomenologists” and “critics, not caretakers.”

In addition to questioning the wisdom of Hughes’ focus on the figure of Muhammad rather than theology or law for deconstructing and reconstructing the study of Islam, this reviewer also notes Hughes’ unfortunate selection of books for critical examination in the first chapter. From the titles and the authors’ introductions to the works that Hughes selected (*Memories of Muhammad*, by Safi, *Following Muhammad*, by Ernst, and *In the Footsteps of Muhammad*, by Ramadan), it becomes clear that the objective of these publications is to showcase not critical scholarship but theological – perhaps even devotional – meditations and personal interpretations of the significance of the figure of the Prophet for practicing Muslims. As such, challenging these books does little to substantiate the scholarly deconstruction of the subject matter that Hughes purports to undertake. Hughes instead ought to have chosen other works of scholarship from within the field. While his reservations against using one’s academic credentials and institutional position for such a publication are understandable, scholars of Islam are not alone in doing so: High profile scholars have always banked on their academic reputations for driving particular political, ideological or confessional agendas -- although in the present instances -- it may be quite another thing when this agenda is so closely related to their specialism. In this regard the academic presses involved also carry part of the blame in including such publications in their fund

Nonetheless, Hughes appears not to approve of such practices, calling the self-described “Islamic Religious Studies” approach of *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, which Carl Ernst co-edited with Richard Martin, “manipulative in its use of sources, and distortive in its conclusions” (p. 3). The title of that particular volume may be rather grandiose and its contents fall short in delivering on a real rethinking of the field, but, as Hughes observes in the chapter of his current work dedicated to the Ernst and Martin book, their text was conceived as a *festschrift* for Ernst’s close colleague Bruce Lawrence of neighboring Duke University. Selecting such a volume of essays for a criticism appears to be part of the ongoing polemic between different camps in the American academy, while criticizing another publication making more solid scholarly claims would have lent stronger support to the valid arguments Hughes is trying to make. Moreover, this chapter has had an earlier reincarnation as a book review for – ironically – the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. As also pointed out by Hughes, a lot of this output is generated because of the climate in which the study of Islam has to take place in post-9/11 America, forcing Islamicists to walk a tightrope between apologists and Islamophobes.

A final weakness of the book is its misleadingly entitled chapter “John Esposito and the Muslim Women.” Not only do women feature only peripherally in this chapter (which deals primarily with the undeniably prominent place occupied by John Esposito in an array of US higher education institutions), but Esposito’s significance in the field rests not on his original scholarship but on the role he has managed to invent for himself as a facilitator and mediator. Therefore, he does not present the best example of a touchstone for the state of affairs in the academic study of Islam. In all fairness, Esposito makes no claims that he does. When he was made aware of *Theorizing Islam*, he responded by sharing a biographical sketch of himself through the AAR Islam Section’s mailing list. That bio highlighted his ten-year background in Catholic seminary training, followed by studies of a variety of religious traditions and relatively late shift in focus to the study of Islam at Temple University, which at the time was dominated by the “Islamization of Knowledge” approach of Ismail Raji al-Faruqi. Technically, also, Esposito works not in a religious studies department but in the field of international affairs, and his high profile is shaped by his involvement in the discourse on religion in the American public sphere rather than within academia.

On these grounds one could indeed debate whether such figures should preside over organizations such as the AAR or MESA. Here considerations of access to government administration and, even more importantly, funding bodies may have prevailed over scholarly credentials – in view of the political realities surrounding higher education and academic research that is not necessarily a bad thing in securing money streams for the academic study of Islam.

To offset the “Islamic Religious Studies” of which Hughes disapproves, he proposes an alternative approach: “New Islamic Studies,” of which he says: “This ‘New Islamic Studies’ privileges the examination and analysis, not the mere description, of Islamic data” (p. 118). Unfortunately, his chapters offering alternative approaches to the study of Muhammad and Muslim women do not really deliver in terms of unpacking the more critical, analytical, and theoretically embedded engagement advocated by Hughes, though in this regard, the closing chapter offers a bit more. While Hughes’ borrowing from Bruce Lincoln’s thirteen theses on method published in 1996 gives an insight into where he is coming from and what he envisages as the concerns of this new approach, the proposed agenda – broken down in five destructive and five reconstructive theses – takes up only three and a half pages, a bit meager for a book that promised a new “theorizing” of Islam.

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